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# Mexican Pointy Boots and the Tribal Scene: Global Appropriations of Local Cultural Practices in the Virtual Age

Helena Simonett and César Burgos Dávila

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Era un gran rancho electrónico  
con nopales automáticos,  
con sus charros cibernéticos  
y sarapes de neón.  
Era un gran pueblo magnético  
con Marías ciclótónicas,  
tragafuegos supersónicos  
y su campesino sideral.  
by don pijote de las anchas<sup>1</sup>

Facilitated by neoliberal economic policies and an increased flux of goods and people across borders, the rapid traffic in global sound questions ideas of fixed musical identities and styles bound to specific social groups or cultural areas. In a recent volume on transnational musical practices, editor Alejandro Madrid reminds us that transnational flows are nothing new to the borderlands of the United States and Mexico: “Due to their shared geography, history, political experience, and overall marginalization from Mexican and U.S. mainstream cultural life, the borderlands [...] should be understood historically as a true transnational cultural region.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, since Mexico’s economic restructuring in the 1990s, new channels of communication and new dynamics of formal and informal exchange among Mexicans on both sides of the border have proliferated.

Néstor García Canclini, in his classic work *Hybrid Cultures*, claims that the most innovative and dynamic cultural production resulting from deterritorialization is happening in the main area of migrations on the continent, that is, the border between

Mexico and the United States.<sup>3</sup> Thus, García Canclini asserts that deterritorialization stimulates an immediate re-localization of old and new symbolic productions. Indeed, new musical practices, nurtured by the transnational connections people maintain in these culturally fertile borderlands, have escalated since Mexico's full embrace of neoliberal ideologies that shape border economic development. As global capital crosses national borders and redefines local economies, locality is being transformed into a more complex cultural space that is not limited by specific geographic territories or conventional social relations. The various "border encounters" of this post-colonial era, George Lipsitz writes, is marked by multi-culturalism and multi-lingualism, split subjectivities and divided loyalties.<sup>4</sup> Large-scale migration and displacement have caused a greater plurality and diversity, as well as particularities and a quest for the "local" to counteract the disengagement of identity from one's homeland and history.<sup>5</sup>

In this essay, we examine music and its performative power by engaging in issues such as the localization of global cultural practices, the embracing of cultural practices based on a shared sense of marginalization and peripheralization, as well as the appropriation and resignification of "odd" cultural practices for global consumption, resulting in a cultural mutation of such practices and their objects from "low" to "art." Our approach to analyze *música tribal*, a specific type of Mexican "tribal" electronic dance music, is akin to Jesús Ramos-Kittrell's study of *cumbia* in Monterrey; that is, we understand musical practices as related to the re-territorialization of foreign cultural practices that give a voice of social legitimacy to historically marginalized individuals. The *cumbia* phenomenon, he writes, "invites inquiries about the relevance of geographical context for the mapping of the local in relationship to the transnational arena articulated by networks of migration, consumption, and communication."<sup>6</sup> Rather than understanding the relationship of music to locality in geographical terms, Ramos-Kittrell proposes to see it as "a performative complex, in which individuals assemble their identities through the performance of *cumbia* music as symbolic referent to a collective social and cultural experience."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Mexican *tribal* music is a performative based music-dance practice that partially originated in Monterrey *cumbia* and, correspondingly, appealed to youths situated outside the mainstream.

Beyond individuals' resignification of expressive culture as a means of identity formation and self-representation, we are primarily interested in exploring the role of new electronic audiovisual media in the global dissemination of local cultural practices, and in how these media encourage a new kind of "cultural cannibalism," in which artists feed off each other. We are interested in the appropriation and re-appropriation, mixing and remixing of certain aspects of Mexican "tribal" culture by international producers for global consumption. Because the Internet and social media networks were vital in both *tribal*'s emergence and global spread, media and mediation are objects of our ethnographic inquiry. Ethnographic approaches to mediation are particularly compelling, William Mazzarella holds, "because they do not have to rely primarily on speculative abstraction to render visible those potentialities that are constitutive of, and yet disavowed in, any social order."<sup>8</sup> Even though our research was mainly conducted on the Internet and relies on computer-mediated communications of online users, our prior experiences of conducting conventional, "thick" ethnographic research in northern Mexico and our personal immersion in cultural practices of the region allow us to culturally contextualize the social-cue-impoverished online data. Thus, our virtual ethnography, or webnography, engages analytic practices derived

from conventional ethnography to reveal “webs of meaning,” in the Geertzian sense, that are relevant to the culture we study.

## ***Tribal Guarachero: Roots and Routs***

In 2010, *tribal guarachero* was hailed as a “hot new sound,” as an “instantly recognizable club-friendly roller,” not to be confused with *tribal house* or *technocumbia*.<sup>9</sup> Like many of the recent hybrid Latin genres, it is difficult to define *tribal* music in terms of genre because, as Fabian Holt argues, “genre is not only ‘in the music’ but also in the minds and bodies of particular groups of people who share certain conventions.”<sup>10</sup> According to Monterrey-based DJ Erick Rincón, one of *tribal guarachero*’s founders, Mexican “tribal music” is a combination of (assumed) pre-Hispanic or Aztec and African (black tropical) sounds with a *cumbia* bass line.<sup>11</sup> *Tribal* emerged at the turn of the new millennium in Mexico City, Rincón recalls. “At the beginning it sounded more indigenous, more Aztec. Once it made it to Monterrey, *tribal guarachero* was born; mixing more *guacharacas colombianas* and *cumbia*.”<sup>12</sup> Music critic Shawn Reynaldo clarifies: “The name is a reference to *guaracha*, another Latin rhythm with roots in Cuba, although calling *tribal guarachero* a sonic descendent of *guaracha* is a bit of a stretch. [...] While these Pre-Hispanic sounds and bits of other more traditional Latin genres — *cumbia* is often cited as a major influence — are still present in the music, over time the style has been increasingly infiltrated by house, techno, and electro, resulting in a present-day *tribal guarachero* that is explicitly electronic.”<sup>13</sup> He continues, “The formula is quite simple, the production is lo-fi, and even the best songs are rather repetitive; as such, there are plenty of lazy remixes and lackluster *tribal guarachero* tunes out there. Some of these characteristics undoubtedly stem from the fact that the *tribal guarachero* scene isn’t exactly populated by electronic-music veterans. Although it may not have roots in urban slums, as many other en vogue global bass genres do, it is dominated by teenagers.”<sup>14</sup>

The first *tribal* collective of DJs, 3BallMTY (pronounced in Spanish as “Tri Ball Monterrey”), was formed in 2009 by sixteen-year old Erick Rincón and his teenage friends Sergio Zavala, aka DJ Sheeqo Beat, and Alberto Presenda, aka DJ Otto. Shortly after, they were invited to the Worldtronics festival in Germany. In 2011, the group signed a record contract with the label Latin Power Music, a division of Universal Music, and in December released their debut EP (extended play) album *Inténtalo*. Their single “Inténtalo,” from that very same album, was number one on the Billboard Latin Song chart for two weeks, garnering 3BallMTY a Latin Grammy award for Best New Artist. Four years later, the DJs won a Billboard Mexican Music award for Artist of the Year in the category Duranguense/Grupero/Cumbia. 3BallMTY’s music video “Inténtalo” on YouTube featured the three DJs as well as the dance and fashion style that was born with *tribal guarachero* music: *cumbia tribal* (tribal cumbia).<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 1: 3BallMonterrey DJs at a live performance. (Screenshot)

The appearance of the pointy boots fashion coincided with and contributed to the rising popularity of *tribal guarachero* music in 2009 in the north-central state of San Luis Potosí, in the small town of Matehuala, just three hours south of Monterrey. Young men and boys wearing pointy boots formed all-male crews to compete in dance-offs at local nightclubs to *tribal* music. Participants in the dance contests spent weeks on coordinating their dance moves and fabricating their boots. They used plastic tubes, leather, screws, and decorative sequins, flashing LED lights, and other material to craft the pointiest long-toed boots—up to 5 feet long. Matching western shirts and skinny jeans to accentuate the footwear complemented their dance outfit.





Fig. 2 and 3: Tribaleros from Matehuala. (Photographs by Edith Valle)

The success story of this new music and dance style, however, is much more complex than what this brief introduction may suggest. *Tribal guarachero* is a transnational and global music phenomenon rather than a genre in a strict sense. As such it calls for a deeper social and cultural analysis that considers shifts in meaning for both music producers and consumers. We will thus first take a closer look at the multifaceted identity negotiations and constructions of its actors, their sociocultural affiliations, aspirations of upward mobility, and contested identity politics that include articulations of ethnic, racial, class, local, national, and transnational identifications.

The majority of the *tribaleros*, DJs and dancing fans alike, were between the age of 15 and 22. This is in sharp contrast to an earlier electronic dance music from the borderlands: Tijuana's *nortec* musicians and artists were well-educated middle-class professionals in their thirties who had been involved in music for over 15 years.<sup>16</sup> They appropriated popular expressive culture of the working class and stereotypical representations of Tijuana to deliberately construct *nortec* as a type of fictional cultural tourism for global consumption. Alejandro Madrid argues that *nortec* music rearticulated ideas about modernity in an imaginary reconstruction of tradition using modern technology. In this process, *nortec* not only recreated tradition according to the present, but also responded to the desires for modernity of neglected Mexican and Latino youths. "The use of *norteña* [accordion] and *tambora* [brass] sounds obeys the *tijuanenses'* alignment with discourses of difference from the United States, Europe, and Mexico; such principle allows them to enter these markets by positioning themselves within the limits of their ethnicity as it is written by those discourses."<sup>17</sup> But the music also validated them with its claims for authentic identity.

In a similar vein, the *tribaleros* reterritorialized their electronic music by appropriating the Colombian *guacharacas* (scrapers) and *cumbia* rhythms so familiar to local audiences. It was the particular geographic position of Monterrey, the hub of the recording industry in north-central Mexico, that made *tribal*'s pre-Hispanic sound elements—a marker of Mexico City and its *conchero* dance scene<sup>18</sup>—to fade and give way to the rhythmic patterns and timbres of *cumbia*. While the members of the Nortec collective bluntly disassociated themselves from the *nacos*, a slang word for the popular class, but whose (supposedly) non-sophisticated music elements distinguished their electronica style, the *tribalero* DJs never allied themselves with the boot-wearing, sombrero-touting, small-town dancers who made their music famous.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the very first image on the “Inténtalo” music video shows a pair of red sneakers—Rincón's —, then the casually dressed DJs, the vocalists América Sierra and El Bebito and female dancers in elegant, urban style wear appear. It takes the viewer half into the video to spot the first pointy boots. They belong to a six-men *tribalero* dance crew from Matehuala, dressed in all black and white, with cowboy hats and futuristic sunglasses and pointy boots made of fake zebra skin that match the dance floor pattern. Licensed by Fonovisa (Universal Music Mexico), the leading seller in the “Regional Mexican” genre, it is no surprise to see a preference for a visual aesthetics that appeals to a young, urban audience fluent in the acquisition of foreign sounds, meanings, and symbols. The pointy boots that evoked a strong regional and ethnic identity associated with the *nacos* (hillbillies) disappeared altogether in 3BallMTY's succeeding music videos.

Even though the pointy boots with their sparkling covers synthesized a certain urban modernity over a kind of rural footwear, cowboy boots remain a rural object and symbol.<sup>20</sup> Earlier working-class youth fashions that went together with popular music styles were similarly codified: the *quebradita* dance in southern California and the *pasito duranguense* in Chicago both involved the *norteño/vaquero* (northern/cowboy) outfit, *tejano* Stetson hat and boots, derived from actual *vaquero* gear.<sup>21</sup> Both *technobanda* and *duranguense* were deeply entrenched in blue-collar immigrant experience and aesthetics and hence never transcended ethnic and class boundaries. Even though the term “*botas picudas*” (pointy boots) had become somewhat synonymous with *música tribal*, 3Ball's turning away from the pointy boots opened up a much larger market—one of global extension. The socially upward aspiring DJs had quickly realized that a music that is largely disseminated through the Internet must defy traditional notions of national and ethnic identities to give rise to virtual communities with multifaceted identities.

Ideas regarding urban modernity and sophistication, such as expressed in the 3Ball music videos, hinge on constructions of local traditions empowered by foreign customs and modern technologies. Local DJs or *sonideros* had enjoyed wide popularity among Monterrey's popular classes spinning the latest recordings of *música tropical* (tropical music) since the late 1950s, when rural migrants who arrived in Monterrey from the states of San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, and Coahuila began to adopt the then popular, cosmopolitan tropical Colombian music.<sup>22</sup> *Cumbia colombiana*, however, was “a performative referent to *la Colombia*, not the country but a set of foreign cultural practices, symbols, and meanings appropriated by marginal individuals that, as a form of identity organization, acquire[d] social legitimacy through consumption.”<sup>23</sup> Already familiar with accordion-driven music (*música norteña*) and brass bands (*tamborazo*), these working-class migrants found comfort in popular music of the similar sounding

*porro* (Colombian brass bands) and accordion-based *vallenato* bands from Colombia's Atlantic coast, playing danceable *cumbias* and storytelling *vallenatos*.

By the 1980s, the consumption of Colombian music in Monterrey via radio, discotheque, music festivals and private parties at which DJs played the latest hits of Colombian music had spread beyond the socially and economically deprived neighborhoods, but their own *cumbia (colombiana)* productions were not (yet) commercially viable.<sup>24</sup> *Sonideros* would bring their ambulant discotheque to weekend *tardeadas*, street dancing events, to entertain the crowd with *cumbia* and later, in the 1980s, with other tropical music such as *salsa*. Migrants from central, south-central Mexico brought this cultural practice to the United States in the late 1980s. Since then, *sonidero* shows grew in popularity among predominantly young, blue-collar immigrants.<sup>25</sup> The late 1990s, following the implementation of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), saw an increasing acceptance of the Monterrey *colombiana* after the popular culture industry discovered it as a potentially lucrative new musical style. With Celso Piña's Latin Grammy nominated "Cumbia sobre el río" ("Cumbia over the river") in 2001, the genre and its new hybrids gained a certain legitimacy and "new generations of Colombians or colombias, as they call themselves, created more music groups and styles of dance, dress, and use of the body linked not only to their marginality but also to a constant bond with the cities of San Antonio, Houston, and Dallas."<sup>26</sup> Despite the mainstream success of Monterrey *cumbia* legend Celso Piña, José Juan Olvera observes that it was difficult for *colombias* "to be accepted into the culture industry with a music stigmatized for its connection with drug addicts, gangs, and delinquents."<sup>27</sup> Their music was characterized by specific cultural practices or "socializing rituals," as Ramos-Kittrell calls them, during which space acquires a contextual relevance. Such rituals rely "not only on listening, but also on the appropriate dancing to this music."<sup>28</sup>

Dancing has been the focal point of *tribal* music videos, and the dancing bodies of fans played a fundamental role in shaping the multiple identities of the *tribal* scene. As one critic wrote, *tribal*'s "hyperactive, borderline-trance melody and incessant drums are sure to get folks moving, regardless of what side of the border they happen to be on."<sup>29</sup> Another observed: "In such a paradoxically tight-knit and spread out scene, another identity marker is, of course, dress. Music videos like 3bal Mty's [*sic*] *Inténtalo* showcase the *bota puntiaguda*, or pointy boots, that seem to have taken the scene by storm."<sup>30</sup> Fashion is indeed a very important ingredient of youth culture in general, but taste and aesthetic inclination are always socially informed. Thus, the boots that came to define *tribal* were more than a fashion statement.

## Pointy Boots: Contested Identities

The pointy boots appeared in early 2009, apparently caused by rivalries between youths from ranches surrounding Matehuala, a city of eighty thousand inhabitants in north-central Mexico. In such rural towns "there has always been a tendency to compete over who has the best pickup trucks, hats, and now boots," a San Luis Potosí interviewee in Texas explained.<sup>31</sup> The pointy boots, a form of expression of rural, marginalized youths, were then brought to Dallas and other Texan cities by migrants from rural San Luis Potosí. Rural and semirural inhabitants with little access to material goods and technology tend to develop their cultural capital instead, Olvera suggests.<sup>32</sup> Expressive experimentation and sociability are valued by a supportive social network, even when



people migrate to cities and abroad. Fashion identifies one's belonging to a community of taste. "Fashion offers a socially binding and valid standard of taste which, however, is only based on the individual 'preferences' and choices of taste of the members of such a 'community of taste.'"<sup>33</sup> While such communities of taste are ephemeral, they nevertheless create order in a rapidly changing society and afford participants with a certain stability and recognition within the community. For some young men, to wear pointy boots was not a matter of liking or comfort but of conquest: "If you wear boots the girls will notice you; you have a bigger impact."<sup>34</sup> A view confirmed by young women who thought that the pointier boots looked more attractive, "more sexy." Women "look first at the boots, then the cloths, and then what the guy looks like."<sup>35</sup>

Local Matehuala youths were given credit for the creation of the innovative boots in a 2011 documentary titled *Mexican Pointy Boots*, an episode of VICE Presents, hosted by Bernardo Loyola. "The Mexican party scene has fully embraced ridiculously long pointy boots and tribal music," VICE announced, and "we explore the pointiest boots on the planet and the culture to which they are tied."<sup>36</sup> The interviewed youths all confirmed that the boot fashion began with the *tribal* music. "We started making boots that were longer and longer. People from other ranches wanted to compete with us, and they started making longer boots [...] We doubled the size. We just wouldn't give up." That's how they ended up in their current form. The *tribaleros* manufactured the boots themselves, using plastic tubes and other materials to add length to the existing boot toe. All-male dance crews crafted pointy boots for all kinds of occasions, from dance competitions organized in local clubs and *quinceañeras* (coming-of-age parties for girls), to celebrations of Mexican holidays and Halloween. The shape of the boots had an influence on the dancer's body posture as well as on the kind of steps he could perform. Boots forced the dancer to slightly bend the knees; the slant-cut heels facilitated executing the shuffling *tribal* step; and the elongated toecaps forced him to dance alone—or with his boots, holding onto the tips like reins.



Fig. 4: Pointy boots. (Photograph by Edith Valle)

The inventiveness of local youths to fashion their own dance outfit, however, was soon contested as the following myth-making story about the origin of the boots illustrates:

The customer known only as “Cesar of Huizache” had an odd request for shoemaker Dario Calderon: He showed him a cell-phone photo of a sequined cowboy boot with pointy toes so long, they curled up toward the knees. He wanted a pair, but with longer toes.—“I thought ‘What’s up with this dude?’” Calderon said at his shop in Matehuala, a northeastern Mexican city of farmers and cattle ranchers accustomed to a more stoic cowboy look. The boot in the photo measured 60 centimeters (23 inches) “but we made him a pair that were 90 centimeters (35 inches) long.”—The mystery man from Huizache, a nearby village, wore his new boots to Mesquit Rodeo nightclub, where he danced bandido style with a handkerchief hiding his mouth and nose. “He was dancing and having a good time and he didn’t care what people were saying about him,” said Fernando Lopez, the master of ceremonies at the rodeo-themed disco.—Then he disappeared.—The next thing Calderon knew, it seemed like everyone wanted the bizarre, half-Aladdin, all-Vegas pointy boots, from little boys attending church ceremonies to teenagers at the discos.<sup>37</sup>

It was those unusual, “comically proportioned” pointy boots that caught international attention and caused a frenzied debate about identity, Mexican identity in particular, that was mainly carried out on the Internet. Within a couple of years, the boots had become the most contested symbol of *tribal* identity.

The VICE documentary, once posted on YouTube, triggered hateful reactions from viewers outside the community. By October 2013, the site had over half a million hits and repulsive comments were numerous. The young *tribaleros* were insulted with derogatory words like “ridiculous clowns,” “beaners,” “frijoleros,” “nopaleros,” “pinches indios nacos.”<sup>38</sup> The following comments in English language are illustrative of the hostile sentiments expressed by many:

— This phenomenon is one of many that pay tribute to the absurd amount of lead in your candy, and the stupidity that is known as Mexico. Seriously, you’re going to try to give credit to Mexico for inventions from other countries. I’m hoping the borders will be closed soon, no thinking true American would even consider these “fashion.” You need to get a brain wet back [“wetback” is a derogatory term used to describe Mexicans who have immigrated illegally to the United States by swimming or wading across the Rio Grande]!

— Irrefutable one of the most stupidest trends that I have witnessed. How do these fags run from the Zetas [drug cartel] in these stupid looking boots?<sup>39</sup>

Some felt compelled to write in defense of Mexican culture at the sight of this new fashion, based on a presumption that taste is connected to class, and class to geography:

— Those boots are not cool in Mexico. They are ridiculous and useless, and are usually worn by “Nacos” which are the most poor, outcast, and worthless social group in Mexico. This is not part of our culture, and it’ll never be.

— Not everybody in Mexico is doing this stupidass shit is just one state called san luis potosi ... bunch of fucking hill billys. ... im guessin only the NORTH EASTERN mexican states ... the NORTH WEST states we hate them and laugh at their stupidity.

For sure, localized transnational music styles have their own distinct histories of migration and racialized class articulations. But it was nevertheless startling to see the aggressive verbal outbursts against the pointy boots fashion posted on the Internet. Some commentators reacted to the frenzy calling for tolerance:

— What is low about this? These people wear what they want, do what they want, and seem to have a great life. I am an European, who loves Mexico and has lived in La Condensa. We all know Mexico is huge and quite diverse, and that tribal is a minority. Mexico is very lucky to (also) have them.

— I think this is so “cool” a little crazy but what the hell.. and they’re not hurting anyone.. why all the bitching.. I’d go see them perform.. and have you seen some of the shoes for women in France?? long tipped with a thick cross shape at the toe... now that was whack... Andale Muchachos!!

— Fabulous. And the self-security of the way they assume they wear what they want is very refreshing. More power to them!

— I can see Lady Gaga, one of the most prolific characters of our modern era, wearing this pointy boot trend, why not the average person? They are specifically worn for partying, not everyday use, I think it’s awesome the type of vision, whether crappy or not, people can come up, it’s their take on creative. The music grew on me and I like it, pretty genius if you think about it.

It did not take long for someone in the shoe industry to realize that the pointy boots invented by a handful of creative youths from a small Mexican town could be made into a hot commodity for a larger market. After watching the VICE documentary, Alberto Sánchez Garza, a young industrial designer in Monterrey, offered pointy boots for sale on the MercadoLibre website<sup>40</sup>—boots he did not have at that time. Six hundred hits and several offers on the first day indicated that pointy boots were a desirable object and persuaded Sánchez Garza to launch a customized boots business, shipping his extravagant footwear to customers around the world, from Alaska to Argentina, England, Russia, and Korea.<sup>41</sup> The pointy boot became a collector’s object—free of any ethnic or class associations of its original creators and wearers.

## “Play Hard”: Taking the Mixing and Fashion a Step Further

International artists too noticed the unique boot fashion. Among them the worldwide renowned French house musician, DJ, music producer and songwriter David Guetta (b. 1967). A double Grammy winner, seven-time Grammy nominee, American Music Award winner, multiple-time World Music Award winner and number one DJ with more than 45 million followers on Facebook, 15 million on Twitter and over a billion views on his videos, Guetta worked together with Swedish film director Andreas Nilsson to produce a music video for his song “Play Hard.” Nilsson, who professedly “ended up in the music video world by mistake,” had already produced rather bizarre music videos for Miike Snow (“The Rabbit,” 2010) and 2Chainz (“Birthday Song,” 2012, featuring Kanye West). Nilsson said in an interview that he loved to work in “the twilight zone between performance/art/music.”<sup>42</sup> His videos, for which he finds inspiration in films such as Jarmusch’s or Tarkovsky’s, are not only an interpretation of the music but also a comment on Western civilization.

The “Play Hard” video is an obvious nod to Finnish film director Aki Kaurismäki’s 1989 cult film, *The Leningrad Cowboys Go America*, a farce that lampoons the extent to which the tackiest aspects of American popular culture have had an impact on even the farthest reaches of faraway. Kaurismäki outfitted his seven self-consciously eccentric Russian musician-cowboy protagonists with “needlelike winklepicker shoes that could have been torn from the feet of oversize elves.”<sup>43</sup> A cheeky appropriation of American culture, Kaurismäki follows the Cowboys as they bravely make their way by car across

the New World, from New York to Mexico. Their hilarious music, a fusion of polka, punk, rock, and Russian and American folk, underscores the Cowboys' comic tale. Whether or not the Mexican *tribaleros* who sported their own version of elongated pointed-toe cowboy boots knew that Kaurismäki designed those preposterous winklepickers as a mockery of culture clash is an irrelevant matter; but the many negative comments and even hateful slander in response to the VICE documentary speak to the issue.

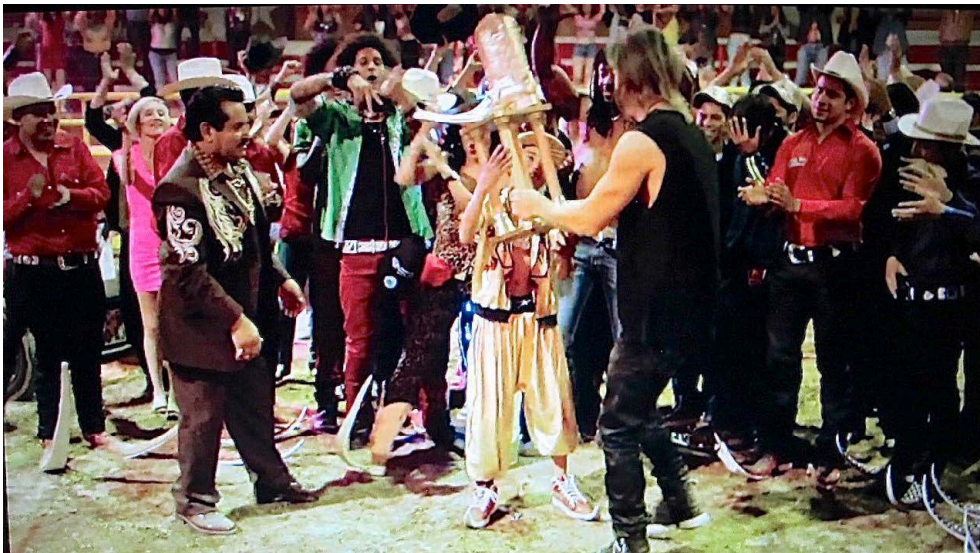


Fig. 5 and Fig. 6: "Play Hard" music video. (Screenshots)

Guetta's "Play Hard" video was viewed over four million times in the first four days after it was launched on the Internet. On Guetta's official website on Vevo, fifteen thousand comments were posted in those few days, an indication of the furor it had caused.<sup>44</sup> The reactions to the "Play Hard" video in Mexico were divided, but many were upset about the prejudices and "erroneous image" it spread about Mexican culture. A YouTube viewer from Mexico City wrote:

Kinda stupid to try to justify the lousy taste that was used to create this video clip.  
This video clip does not represent Mexico at all. SHAME!

To which a viewer from Dallas responded:



Agreed, it doesn't represent Mexico at all. However, it's quite accurate at representing Mexicans from Dallas (where I live). Most of the stuff in this video is real... exaggerated, but real. I'm not offended, I'm just terribly confused as to what the whole purpose of this video is. I'm clearly missing the point.

A more differentiated opinion was expressed in the following comment:

It has become apparent though that the pointy boots (and did I see a unibrowed beauty contestant in there?? Possibly a Frida Kahlo reference...) and some of the newer trends have gone past Mexico's borders and caught international attention, so like it or not, the video does represent Mexico's current infatuation with the ugly pointy boots, I mean there are a large number of Mexicans IN Mexico wearing those things, as ugly as they may seem, they have caught the media's attention to the point that a French producer/DJ is featuring them in his video. I was lost as to what the point was of the video, but hey, I ain't hating, I'm just left scratching my head...

The "Play Hard" video is indeed quite peculiar. Nilsson, known for his nag for inventive, surreal, wacky-tacky videos, infused "Play Hard" with a unique sense of the ridicule and even the absurd: gang members or drug dealers who traffic a pointy boot observed by someone with a lucha libre wrestling mask; a tattooed image of the Virgen de Guadalupe, the Mexican Virgin Mary; beauty pageants with Frida Kahlo unibrows; a lowrider car on top of which a tribalero crew is dancing; a pink donkey that reminds us of the famous Tijuana Zebra (a painted donkey) and an oversized banana, maybe a allusion to the popular banana boats in beach resorts; and the more subtle reference to Mexican culinary culture, the popular Takis snack. San Francisco-based editor of Beatport News, Ken Taylor, called the video "a treasure trove of high-art influence."<sup>45</sup> But one that "alternates between inexplicable weirdness and poking fun at racial stereotypes," an Internet user wrote<sup>46</sup>—although maybe not meant as such. Guetta, utterly unconcerned about ethnic or class perceptions and nationalist sentiments in Mexico, said "behind the scenes":

This is a video I was waiting for so many years. I think this is super funny; it's cultural, because it is talking about a subculture in Mexico that is real: the pointy boots, tribal. I love to show people that have an obsession, have passion and want to be the best at what they do. A lot of people would say: What? Pointy boots? What's the point? Are they crazy?—No, they are not crazy. I thought it was fun to show it to the world and do it with a sense of humor.<sup>47</sup>

The video footage was shot in two days in the picturesque neighborhood of Santa María la Ribera, located in the Cuauhtémoc district of Mexico City, just west of the historic center, and the Rodeo "Santa Fe." Altogether one hundred people—crew members, actors, and dancers—and an additional 85 extras for the rodeo audience on the second day of shooting were enlisted. African American R&B recording artist Ne-Yo and Senegalese American R&B and hip hop recording artist Akon collaborated with Guetta on the song; the dance parts included Guadeloupean French hip-hop new style dancers and choreographers Laurent and Larry Bourgeois, an Internet sensation known as Les Twins, as well as the Mexican crews Los Socios and Tribal Matehuala, and teenage *tribal* dancer Ariel Ruiz. Despite the apparent Mexican theme, the main cast was truly international, and they obviously had a lot of fun acting for this video. Guetta's interest in the *tribal* subculture, however, was rather selective: it was the exotic pointy boots that caught his attention, not the *tribal* music. The young 3Ball DJs found their own way to "go global."

## ***Tribal* Goes Global: Internet and Social Media**

The Billboard Mexican Music Awards in 2012 was dominated by “young talent and a bold new musical trend [...] with 3BallMTY, the edgy tribal music troupe, winning nine awards, including New Artist of the Year, Artist of the Year, Duo or Group; Song Artist of the Year and Digital Download Artist of the Year.” The 3Ball DJs “highlighted the dynamic nature of regional Mexican music, the top-selling Latin sub-genre in the United States.”<sup>48</sup> How did the three DJs get there so fast?

The idea to produce *tribal* music, its expansion and the success of 3BallMTY, the acceptance and impact of this music all depended largely on the use of technology. The networks of electronic music distribution had already been established by DJs in Monterrey and the city’s urban alternative music scene had enjoyed a growing popularity. 3BallMTY was riding with the tide. However, before their music was “discovered” by producer and remixer Toy Selectah (Toy Hernández) who aided them with their first official release, a free EP with five tracks of *tribal guarachero* music, the teenage DJs had gradually built relationships and networks amongst kindred spirits. According to DJ Erick Rincón:

The same way as *tribal* Monterrey became known, through the social networks, we [the members of the group] too found each other through social networks [...] There I met Sheeqo Beat [Sergio Zavala] and we agreed to meet in person because we only knew each other online and by sharing music. We decided to play together at a party. When I heard him, I discovered that we liked the same kind of music: *tribal* [...] We started to think that it would be grand to have a project where we could play *tribal* together.<sup>49</sup>

Being in contact with other young people through computers and social media networks to share music and learn how to create one’s own music from home was another important factor in the production of *tribal*. Sergio Zavala said in an interview that he learned to mix music and operate an audio production console with the help of a virtual DJ. When the young DJs were invited to play at live parties, they faced a new challenge: equipment that was not operated digitally, that “had real buttons, physical and everything. We learned from our mistakes. When we started to play at parties—obviously it was not the same as now—we made a lot more mistakes.”<sup>50</sup> The social media networks were crucial for the launching and dissemination of *tribal*, Rincón explained.

We made ourselves known through the Internet, the social networks and 4share where we posted all our material, all our songs: Sheeqo’s, Otto’s, and mine [...] It is where everything starts: the downloads begin to appear in blogs; it goes to the United States and a new fashion appears in San Luis, the pointy boots and all of that. Thanks to the Internet [...] all that happened due to the Internet, YouTube, Facebook.<sup>51</sup>

The idea of a band rehearsing, preparing songs to go to a recording studio or a radio station, is a thing of the past, Joan-Elías Adell states in his book on music in the digital age.<sup>52</sup> Access to alternative ways of low-cost production and distribution with a high impact is crucial for startup musicians. The use of electronic resources allow direct access to music and circumvent the need for physical support and expensive production structures. In turn, this has allowed the proliferation of groups that contemplate to record directly, without having to go through the mediation of record companies.<sup>53</sup> 3BallMTY’s experience with their single “Besos al aire,” included in the album *Inténtalo*, serves as an example. According to Rincón:

It is a single chosen by the listeners, right? [Well,] *Inténtalo* came out, “Besos al aire” and ten more songs. And the ones I liked most were “Inténtalo” and “Besos al aire.” So we uploaded “Inténtalo” as the first single and then “Besos al aire.” A fan uploaded it to YouTube without video and it got over one million hits. And then it was removed because of copyright issues [...] Right now the official video is out. In four days it got half a million hits.<sup>54</sup>

In his study on young music fans, Héctor Fouce stated that while before music guided people, people now guide the music.<sup>55</sup> The proximity between fans and musicians had always been important for the production, distribution and circulation of music. Today however, the social media networks are a key element in the success or failure of a musical group. For 3BallMTY it was a crucial space for spreading their music and to interact with its audience:

— I believe that today there is an important relation between the Internet and the artist. In reality, the future of what can happen between the Internet and an artist is here already! That is, an artist can be much more in touch [with his/her audience] than any time before. You can do twitcams, tweet, answer via Facebook, or use Instagram to post photos of your house, what you eat, such things. I believe the Internet is the closest contact an artist can have with his/her fans.

— We only recently started to use Facebook and Twitter. These are two really big media for diffusion because there are many people who do not watch television but are online instead. The majority of the youth uses Twitter or Facebook. That’s why it helps us a lot to interact with our public, with the people who follow us. We always keep track. In fact, my cell phone is right next to me and I’m always on Twitter and Facebook, responding to people that follow me.<sup>56</sup>

According to Fouce, virtual audiences expect musicians to maintain close contact with them and respond to their demands. Communication via Internet and the social media networks makes such an intense and immediate contact possible. To attract and keep a virtual audience interested involves several activities by the artist, such as maintaining a profile, facilitate access to one’s music through the Internet, “cuddle the audience” and “offer something special.” Besides uploading material regularly, artists also post photos of their performances, update their profiles and comment on their current activities, send greetings, dedicate songs, or write blurbs to keep contact with the public.

Radio and television have become secondary media for music, communication and creative media specialist Tara Brabazon reasons.<sup>57</sup> That is, they no longer are the primary means through which people discover new music. This displacement has intensified since new technologies allowed to store large quantities of music. But most important is that the alternatives—Internet, Podcast, MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, and Spotify—allow people to listen to novel music, including music that has not even been released yet. These new channels of communication permit the free circulation of music.

YouTube had been one of the channels exploited by the producers of *tribal*. Based on the slogan “Broadcast Yourself” and the idea of a shared culture, the producers and consumers of *tribal* posted videos, commented upon and evaluated them, and uploaded to other social media networks. Prior to the 3BallMTY EP, the DJs did not make their tracks with official releases in mind. Zavala said, “We usually upload our songs to a host called 4shared, which the majority of us here in Monterrey use [...] The managers of the most well-known tianguis (open-air markets) download them from these very same links and put them on sale.”<sup>58</sup> The dissemination of their productions was purely “viral,” that is, it depended on the recommendation and/or interest of others. Success

was measured by the spread and popularity increase of their product such as the number of reproductions, views and shares of their video.<sup>59</sup> In that sense, YouTube and similar social media networks establish new practices of use and cultural consumption, as well as new modes of reception, production, circulation, and socialization of music. No doubt, musical productions have a major social impact in terms of diffusion and consumption.<sup>60</sup>

Barry Brown and Abigail Sellen hold that in the virtual context listeners should be considered producers and distributors of music rather than passive consumers.<sup>61</sup> They point out that today's practices that involve new technologies are similar to conventional ways of music sharing. The downloading, sharing, and copying of music posted on the Internet allow users to explore music which one might not have bought in the first place. Moreover, Brown and Sellen claim that sharing music on the Internet makes users into producers and distributors, which itself furthers the circulation of music. The digital format of music, thus, should be understood as a complementary means of music circulation, not as replacement of discs or of live music.

In the practices of the youths, the virtual environment does not exclusively serve the transmission of information, content or musical products.<sup>62</sup> In the virtual space youths socialize and establish relations with others—they produce, construct and reconstruct their music. It permits for new experiences and articulates shared musical practices and dynamics. Similarly, Christine Hine argues that the Internet represents a space in which culture is being created.<sup>63</sup> It is in the virtual world of the Internet where communities and significant sociomusical relations are created and shaped. In this sense, and following Hine's suggestion, what sustains a sense of community is not just a physical boundary but a set of shared practices and musical interests. For that reason we prefer to think of the *movimiento tribal* (tribal movement) as a "tribal scene." Rather than the often narrowly defined concept of community, "scene" refers to a broader spectrum of musical activities that include performance, production, marketing, promotion, distribution, and consumption. The term encompasses local, trans-local, and virtual activities. Moreover, *tribal's* remix technique allows for the continuous reinterpretation and resignification of sound. As such it acts as a metaphor for larger processes of collective hybridization in multicultural contexts.<sup>64</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

In an age of globalizing media and markets, the relation between the local and the global is more contested than ever before. Rather than relying on speculative abstraction, we used a webnographic approach to analyze global music circulation, with special attention to audiovisual media. The *tribal* phenomenon shows, contrary to the pessimistic view of a homogenizing global culture, the emancipatory potential of "globalization from below."<sup>65</sup> What had started as an innovative local practice by adolescent *tribal guarachera* enthusiasts who fashioned their own dance outfits grew, due to the Internet, into a phenomenon of global dimension. Within a couple of years, pointy boots, despised by numerous people outside the community as "a disgrace of Mexico's vaquero (cowboy) culture," became a cult object. The music video "Play Hard," Nilsson's lavish production with its keen aesthetic claim for artistry, prompted bewilderment, particularly among Mexican viewers whose idea of Mexican-ness differed quite drastically from the European filmmaker's. Online comments about both



the VICE documentary and the Guetta music video confirm that notions of race, ethnicity, class, and nationality—and thus cultural identity—play a significant, yet ambiguous, role in the imaginary construction of virtual, transnational communities created through the Internet. The free flow of cultural expressions in the Internet and their appropriation in different contexts pose new questions about identity and the production of culture in the virtual age.

Globalization does not destroy locality, John Tomlinson argues, but cultural experience is “lifted out” of its traditional “anchoring” in specific social-geographical locations.<sup>66</sup> In that regard, it is interesting to note that the pointy boots, the very symbol of *tribal guarachera*, disappeared altogether in 3BallMTY’s recent music videos. Erick Rincón claimed in an interview that he saw the pointy boots for the first time at the Far West Discotheque in Dallas, where the majority of club goers were from San Luis Potosí. 3Ball’s second music video, “Baile de amor” (2011), featuring Joss Favela, is a self-promotion set in a gym where casually dressed break dancers do a routine to the DJs’ live performance while a fan girl tweets the singer, and other enthusiasts line up in front of a record store to buy the *Inténtalo* album. “Besos al aire” (2012), featuring vocalists América Sierra and Smoky, shows the now-famous three DJs as they enter a fancy club, received by paparazzi and cheering fans, with lightly clad female models preparing themselves for the runway. Footage for “Yo quiero bailar” (2013), featuring Mexican-American hip-hop artist Becky G from Inglewood, was shot at a live performance on Venice beach in California. A massive crowd of young, urban people moves to the *tribal* beat waving huge Mexican flags and an occasional donkey *piñata* and *lucha* wrestling mask. References to Mexico are made through internationally accepted symbols, none of which are ethnically or class codified like the pointy boots.

The music videos produced by 3BallMTY are essentially cuts of live performances staged for the virtual consumer with some extra footage that shares moments of the DJs’ lives. The videos are professionally made and in effect fulfill the fans’ desire to partake in the lives of their idols. 3Ball’s strategy to share their music for free had paid off: they recently collaborated on remixes with international superstars such as Shakira, Paulina Rubio, Daddy Yankee, Don Omar, and J King & Maximan. With the latter, a Puerto Rican *reggaetón* duo, they also collaborated on the music video, “La noche está de fiesta” (2013), a *tribal* remix that visually draws from both countries: Mexico is represented by a street *norteño* band, colorful *papel picado* decoration, and *tribaleros* with pointy boots!<sup>67</sup> On the international showground, the pointy boots had caught up with the *tribal* DJs who had tried to rid themselves from the low-class symbol that ironically had aided them to gain international success.

The trajectory to global fame for the Matehuala pointy-boot *tribal* dancers had started with the VICE video, watched by millions of viewers since it was put on the Internet. Despite scorning and hateful, racialized reactions posted online, it was the inventive boots that caught the eye of international artists, music video directors, shoe designers, and marketers of tourist products alike. In an ever more global, competitive music and business world, consumers desire products that are perceived as new. The perceived newness of the pointy boots was due to changes in just one attribute of the product: the exceedingly elongated toe. The product per se was frivolous or, in Guetta’s words, “super funny.” Some of those who attributed cultural meaning to it, however, perceived the innovation as “horribly ridiculous.”

The pointy boot was soon further appropriated outside its original meaning as footwear. One of the authors of this article spotted the pointy boot on a recent trip to Chihuahua in form of a tacky tourist souvenir: a miniature cup from which to drink tequila. A symbol of the *naco* par excellence in many people's view, the boot transformed into a most intriguing artwork in the hands of Cindy Santos Bravo, a Texan-Mexican visual artist who likes "mash-ups of disparate ideas that re-assign traditional signifiers into a progressed codified existence."<sup>68</sup> Her piece "Terrestrial" (Fig. 7), a sculpture made of feathers and pointy boots that resembles an agave plant, was part of the 2013 MexiCali Biennial in Los Angeles and Mexicali that understands itself as a dynamic platform for creating new channels of communication between artists and audiences in the United States and Mexico.



Fig. 7: "Terrestrial" by Cindy Santos Bravo, in collaboration with pointy boot producer Alberto Sánchez Garza, Monterrey. (Used with permission of the artist.)

The 2013 exhibit was devoted to "cultural cannibalism," in Oswald de Andrade's modernist sense, "as the path forward for a new model of avant-garde practice."<sup>69</sup> Symbolic cannibalism—the swallowing of the "other" to create the "self"—has been used by various Latin American artists to reverse the colonialist logic whereby the colonized culture was seen as passive and imitative, and thus culturally inferior to that of Europe and the United States. A trope of otherness and self-recognition, cannibalism is "a central concept in the definition of Latin American identity."<sup>70</sup> Facilitated by globalizing media and markets, the voracious consumption of otherness to furthering one's own self-expression proliferates. But global cultural consumption is characterized by a kind of "reversed cannibalism": Guetta discovered the artistic-cultural potential of "a subculture in Mexico that is real" (his words) and used it to create an exotic and funny self. The metaphorical consumption of Matehuala local expressions (the pointy boots fashion and *tribal* dance style) by the music video producers created a kind of cultural identity through the process of differentiation. Yet, the music video ultimately erased the differences between local and global cultures because few of the millions of

viewers had the necessary cultural insights to locate the cultural elements—and of those who had, many would not grasp Guetta’s “humor.”

Accelerated by new communication media and new socializing practices, the various appropriations of the pointy boot and the mixing and remixing of *tribal guarachero*, the constant reinterpretation and resignification of images and sounds, both locally and globally, not only challenge our relationship with cultural objects and practices but also urge us to consider shifting and diversified perspectives to understand such practices.

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## NOTES

1. “There was a big electronic ranch with automatic nopal cacti and with cybernetic *charros* (Mexican cowboy costumes) and neon *sarape* blankets. There was a big magnetic village with cyclotronic Marys, supersonic fire-eaters and its sidereal peasant.” Posted on YouTube in June 2013 in response to the documentary *Mexican Pointy Boots*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veQkt4tS0Tc> (accessed Oct.1, 2013). First 8 lines of “*Rancho electrónico - Tiempo de híbridos*,” composed by the Mexican folk-rock musician and singer-songwriter Rodrigo “Rockdrigo” González. All translations into English are ours.
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7. *Ibid.*, 193.
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11. Interview, short documentary *Mexican Pointy Boots*, directed by Esteban Sheridan Cárdenas, <http://www.vice.com/behind-the-seams/mexican-pointy-boots>, posted on April 1, 2011 (accessed Oct. 11, 2013).
12. A *guacharaca* is a Colombian percussion instrument that originated among the native Tairona. It consists of a notched tube that is scraped with a fork to create its characteristic scratching sound. In Mexico the term is used to underscore the genre’s Colombian roots.
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14. According to Reynaldo (*ibid.*), tribal “is marked by its distinctive triplet rhythm, which gives the music an unusual and deceptively slow, loping feel, even as the songs hum along over a 4/4 beat at 133 beats per minute.”
15. Music video “Intentálo,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRYNWfjzfVE>, posted on Nov. 11, 2011 (accessed Oct. 11, 2013); over 40 million hits in the first two years.
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## ABSTRACTS

In this essay, we examine music and its performative power by engaging in issues such as the localization of global cultural practices, the embracing of cultural practices based on a shared sense of marginalization and peripheralization, as well as the appropriation and resignification of “odd” cultural practices for global consumption, resulting in a cultural mutation of such practices and their objects from “low” to “art.” Our approach to analyze *música tribal*, a specific type of Mexican “tribal” electronic dance music that partially originated in Monterrey *cumbia* and, correspondingly, appealed to youths situated outside the mainstream, is to understand musical practices as related to the re-territorialization of foreign cultural practices that give a voice of social legitimacy to historically marginalized individuals.

Dans cet article, nous explorons la capacité performative de la musique en nous interrogeant sur la localisation de pratiques culturelles globales, l’adoption de pratiques culturelles fondées sur un sentiment partagé de marginalisation et de rejet en périphérie, ainsi que sur l’appropriation et la



resignification de pratiques culturelles « bizarres » à des fins de consommation globale, ce qui entraîne des mutations et requalifications culturelles concernant ces pratiques et leurs objets. Notre démarche, afin d'analyser une musique de dance électronique mexicaine appelée « Tribal », qui a ses origines dans la *cumbia* de Monterrey et qui a ainsi pu séduire des jeunes situés hors du *mainstream*, consiste à comprendre les pratiques musicales comme étant liées à la reterritorialisation de pratiques culturelles étrangères qui donne une voix et une légitimité sociale à des individus historiquement marginalisés.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** hybridity; transnational/subcultural identity; mass communication; global technological and economic development; social media networks; virtual ethnography, pointy boots, tribal dance music, música tribal, David Guetta

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